



INDEXA

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Fortitudine Vincimus

("By Endurance We Conquer")

By Jay Slough, K4ZLE ©2016

The title of this article, *Fortitudine Vincimus*, is the family motto of Sir Ernest Shackleton, the famous English Antarctic explorer. It was also the motto of his ship, *Endurance*, that was crushed in the ice in the *Weddell Sea* during his 1914-1915 expedition. He and his crew certainly demonstrated the utmost in endurance in their epic tale of survival. While it would be highly presumptuous to classify our recent VP8STI/VP8SGI operations in the same domain as that of those early explorers, we did exhibit some degree of endurance in conquering our set of circumstances. As they lived up to their motto, we rose to demonstrate the qualities of our name, *Intrepid DX Group*. Each of us can proudly echo the words of Caesar, "veni, vidi, vici." This article is but a snippet of that adventure.

As with most DXpeditions of this magnitude, planning started some two years be-

fore execution. I was invited to join the team about halfway through the planning stage. Having knowledge of the challenges of prior excursions to Southern Ocean DXCC entities and having bounced around on several previous military and ham related ocean "cruises", I was somewhat hesitant to commit. I looked over the roster of who was then on the list, considered the reputation of the team leaders, (Paul, N6PSE, and

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Axel, DL6KVA, at the gravesite of Sir Ernest Shackleton in South Georgia. Shackleton died here of a heart attack in 1921 on his third Antarctic Expedition. His wife requested that he be buried here.

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Dave, K3LP), played back in my mind the videos of the 1992, VP8SSI, expedition and the stories from the Microlite (VP8THU/VP8GEO) trip in 2002, and agreed to join up anyway!

I have been asked several times why anyone 72 years old, would spend six plus weeks of his life and tap such a relatively large chunk of his personal exchequer for a trip as potentially challenging as this one. One of my aunts called me on the phone, after viewing the YouTube video of the VP8SSI trip, and asked me if I was "out of my bloomin' mind!" Others have asked the same question but stated slightly differently. The answer is simple. I, and I am sure others, go for the same reason—CHALLENGE! The physical, mental and spiritual challenges are obvious, but there is also the emotional challenge of pileup encounters—like working your friends, making new friends and feeling the happiness of you on the other end having met your challenge of busting the pileup! Without challenges in our life, we soon grow stale and stodgy. Maybe an alternative response would be the same as George Mallory gave when asked in 1923 why he wanted to climb Mt. Everest. His answer was, "Because it's there." I'm told that more people have reached the summit of Mt. Everest than have operated from South Sandwich! I do not know if that is a true statement or not, but it merits consideration, don't you think?

Amongst the challenges of operating from these types of locales is getting to and fro. From my home in SW Ohio, USA, it is a two day trip to Port Stanley, Falkland Islands, where the team convened. From the Americas there is a once a week flight between Santiago, Chile and the Mt. Pleasant military base in the Falklands. The flight stops in Punta Arenas, Chile and once a month it makes an additional stop in Rio Gallegos, Argentina. There is also an option to fly out of the UK on a military plane, but that alternative was ruled out for various reasons by all team members, including those from Europe and Asia. Most of us had to remain over night in Santiago prior to the final leg to the Falklands.

Arrival in the Falklands went according to plan with an easy transit through immigration, etc. and onward to our transportation from the Mt. Pleasant airport/military base to Port Stanley and subsequent transfer to the R/V Braveheart. I left home on 7 January

and arrived in Santiago on 8 January; departed Santiago on 9 January and boarded the Braveheart that same evening. We set sail for South Georgia at 0530 local time on 10 January.

The voyage from Port Stanley, Falklands to South Georgia was five days. Initially the waters were relatively smooth, but these are waters of the Southern Ocean, otherwise known as the *Roaring Forties* and *Furious Fifties*. By the second day at sea they demonstrated their ability to "Roar"! My estimate of differential of crest to trough reached between 25 and 30 feet at one point in this leg of the trip. Fortunately the prevailing currents in that area tend to be from west to east, and our general direction of travel was toward the southeast. Those with a maritime background know the blessing of following seas, which somewhat mitigated the potential severity of such a sea state.

We spotted our first icebergs on 12 January. Thanks, in part to those near following seas, we arrived at South Georgia at 0300 local on 14 January, where we were required to check in at the British base at King Edward Point before sailing onward to South Thule¹ Island in the South Sandwich² group. Adjacent to King Edward Point is the old whaling station of Grytviken. We had time for a quick walk about there and visited the gravesite of Sir Ernest Shackleton.

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In a short time we were underway again. On the 16th we encountered snow, more icebergs and sighted our first whales of the trip. On the 17th we landed on South Thule and everything was ashore and set up on the 18th. The weather was excellent for our initial landing and set up. We eventually off loaded at essentially the same cliff site as the 2002 Penguins Microlite DXpedition within the caldera lagoon between Thule and Cook Islands.



View of the cliff for access to South Sandwich. All equipment was moved on and off the island here.

In an effort to find a better landing site, we first examined the beach area outside the caldera. Three of our team donned full cold water immersion suits and made a wet landing on that beach. This was probably the same beach where the British troops landed and removed the Argentine base after the 1982 conflict. We decided that this would be too rigorous an approach for the full team to attempt. In

addition, there would be a very high risk of losing or damaging equipment both in the boat-to-land transfer and in the longer traverse from landing site to proposed camping site.

With favorable weather for setting up, things went fairly smoothly. We eventually ended up with two Force 12 tri band beams (20, 15 and 10m), one Force 12 WARC beam (12 and 17m), a Four Square for 40m, separate two element phased arrays for 80 and 160m and a vertical for 30m. We did assemble a 6m beam, but there was no magic to be experienced on the magic band. We used 403A high power multiplexers and band pass filters, which all worked as advertised. Stations were provided by Elecraft—K3's dressed up like the new K3S's, and KPA500's. Our initial plans were to also activate 60 meters; however we discovered that it is not part of the IARU approved band plan for the region. We took materials for several 160 meter listening antennas but found them to be unnecessary from both South Sandwich and South Georgia.

We believe our operating location was within 20 feet of the 1992, VP8SSI, site as there were pieces of green and black tents embedded in the penguin excrement that completely covers this portion of the island! The rescue hut available to previous expeditions no longer exists. Besides the aforementioned tent pieces, all that remains of man's futile attempts to 'settle' the island are fragments of the old Argentine base mentioned above. We used some of the wood planking scattered about to lay a walkway between the sleeping tent and operating tent. When we left the island the only physical evidence of our sojourn was our footprints in the pooh. At one point we were concerned that we would be leaving much more, which I shall explain later.

The operating team did not shuttle between Braveheart and the island. Once we set foot on the island we were there for the duration. The Braveheart crew usually brought us one hot meal each day. Other than that meal, which was usually some form of casserole, we subsisted mostly on Ramen noodles, "cup 'o soup", bread, biscuits (cookies), and fruit. There were 13 of us on the operating team. One of our members, Krassy, K1LZ, had to cancel

¹ Just a bit of trivia. *Thule* is from the ancient Greek and Latin. It has been potentially identified as one of the Shetland Islands, Iceland, or perhaps Norway. It is supposed to be the most "northerly" region of the world. So, South Thule would be the southern-most region of the world. There is an Inuit settlement in NW Greenland called Thule where the U.S. maintains its northern-most Air Force base—750 miles above the Arctic Circle.

² More trivia: Q: Where are the (North) Sandwich Islands? A: The Hawaiian Islands. It is also a former name of the uninhabited atoll, Manuae, in the Cook Islands and a former name of Efate Island in the Republic of Vanuatu. All were named by Captain James Cook FRS, RN.(7 Nov 1728 - 14 Feb 1779).

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at the last minute.

Camp consisted of two dome tents 580 cm diameter (~ 19 ft) and two smaller (two man?) tents. One of the large ones was for operating with six stations. The other large one was for sleeping and "kitchen" with seven cots. One of the smaller tents was used by two hardy souls who attempted to alleviate some of the crowding in the larger sleeping tent. The remaining tent contained two buckets reserved for "solid waste collection" (Loo, Loo, Skip to my Loo)! The first morning we awoke to fog and rain inside the sleeping tent as a result of the warm moisture in our breath condensing on the inside skin of the tents. Subsequently, the sleeping bags always felt a bit damp on the outside.



Penguins frolic in the new snow on our first morning on South Thule.

We had one Liquid Propane powered heater. It was placed just inside the door of the operating tent. It helped some but did not alleviate the constant chill. I tried wearing gloves, but quickly abandoned that idea. We used N1MM+ for logging. I am a "seek and ye shall find" typist with "lazy thumb syndrome." As such, with our laptop logging computers having the mouse pad just below the space bar, I generated my own source of frustration most other team members did not experience. While entering calls into the computer, my lazy thumbs would accidentally tap the mouse pad



Even with my gloves—between the laptop and the K3—off, my typing suffered, and my five layers of clothing didn't keep me warm.

and if the pointer was hovering over an input option, like band or mode change or active function key, I would inadvertently affect that 'command'. If it kicked me into a digital mode, I had to reboot the computer to get back on the proper band/mode! Initially I blamed it on other things and very vociferously expressed *my* displeasure much to my teammates chagrin! I have used N1MM for years and have never had that problem before. Guess my lazy thumbs get lazier when they get cold and I get old?!

While on the subject of chill, I was cold from the time we boarded the ship in Port Stanley until we returned to Port Stanley five weeks later. The temperatures were not really that low, but they were constant and supplementary heat was lacking. Ambient air temperatures probably varied between 28 degrees F and 38 degrees F (- 2.2 to +3.3 C), but there was almost always a constant wind of about 20 mph (32 kph) with gusts in the 40+ mph (64+ kph) range. They did not turn the heat on aboard the ship. That was for two reasons, I am sure.

- 1) Sea sickness residue, unattended, will ferment and become quite noxious and pernicious. Cooler temps retarded fermentation and the subsequent odoriferous environmental impact!
- 2) The ship had limited space. The only 'warm' place, besides the off limits engine room, would be our bunks. People in their bunks are out of the way!

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The first item was expressed directly by Nigel Jolly, the owner of the Braveheart; the second is a personal deduction.

On the 19th we had our first on-island snow and winds started picking up. It snowed again overnight of the 20th with about 3/4 inch accumulation and increasing wind speeds—with both steady and gusty components. Each day brought repairs and modifications to the antenna farm, due either to weather damage, the penguins waddling through the area and subsequently displacing the radials or our constant effort to make things better. Perhaps it is my dimming mental capacity, but each day seemed to also bring more weather challenges—wind peaks a bit stronger and a little more accumulation during the snow showers.



I get cold even now looking at this scene following our first good “summer” snow storm.

On our last night of operating, January 24th, we had winds gusting to greater than 60 knots (69 mph, 111 kph). Directly from the ship's log we read, "Conditions turned to custard." Both the operating and sleeping tents took a real beating in these gale force blows and although not as devastating, conditions were somewhat reminiscent of the YouTube posted film of the 1992 VP8SSI operation³.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5B2oo9-Sjw>

We spent a large part of two nights repairing tent guys and pushing back from the inside against the forces on the outside.

On January 25th, Nigel Jolly, the Braveheart owner decided that we had to evacuate the island. Here is where we thought we might be leaving more than our footprints. During the overnight storm of the 24th the Braveheart had gone outside the caldera to seek shelter on the leeward side of the island. When they returned they discovered that an ice floe threatened to block the entrance to the area between Thule and Cook islands. If that happened and the ship were to reenter and remain within that area, it could have been stuck until the ice melted! The floe was huge. It extended as far as one could see in all directions. The ship radioed the on-shore team and told them to gather only what they could carry of their personal gear and evacuate immediately. Once all were aboard we sailed outside the caldera and spent that night anchored off the leeward side of the island.



This view of our escape path from South Thule did not look nearly so nice when filled with an ice floe blocking our only escape path. Our tent village can be seen in the background.

In retrospect, while we were initially concerned that we might have to leave thousands of dollars worth of equipment there, that was not a likely outcome. We may have had to wait a few days before we could get back on the island, but the probability was

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quite high we would clear our stuff from South Sandwich. However, if the wait were too long it could have jeopardized our operation from South Georgia to the point of having to cancel that leg entirely.

Fortunately the winds and sea currents took the ice floe away from the island overnight and we spent from 0430 to 1400 local time on the 26th retrieving all equipment. We were underway for South Georgia by 1700 local.



A view of our "home" on South Thule before the snows came. Yet, it had to be left behind to meet the pileups awaiting us at South Georgia.

As Jonah endured in the belly of the fish for three days, so were we in the belly of the Braveheart for the three day sail from South Sandwich to South Georgia. At 0600 local, 29 January we arrived at Husvik Bay ready to endure and conquer the challenges of another operation within the bounds of the *Furious Fifties*. Once again the weather for set up was ideal.

Thule Island of the South Sandwich group is beautiful, but Husvik Bay is beautiful in a different way. Thule was almost all snow covered with visible glaciers except for the area where we set up. That area when not covered in snow was covered in seals, penguins—awash in their rookery—and penguin pooh. The "soil" was black and when the temperature got above freezing there was a definite odor about. Access from sea to land where we set up was not obtained by running a landing craft upon the beach. Instead we had a 20 to 30 foot cliff to trav-

erse. (As mentioned previously in regards to the immersion suit landing, there are beach areas on Thule, but we decided that logistics were simpler via the nearer cliff vs. the more distant beach.) Husvik, on the other hand, has a zodiac accessible beach within a short distance of where we planned to operate. During the peak summer period, like when we were there, there are no visible snow covered glaciers, the area behind the beach reminded me somewhat of a river delta, with small streams meandering through a green carpeted bog. There were seals and penguins, but different breeds than on Thule, and the seals were more abundant and aggressive. While the exposed land mass contained its share of animal droppings, the composition was not 100 percent done in dung. The surrounding mountain sides presented a kaleidoscope of subtle shades of gray, brown and reddish tinted rock shards accentuated by white snow covered peaks.



Husvik had us thinking we were on an alluvial plain in the Rocky Mountains in the summer—for a while at least!

Very near to where we set up was the old Husvik Bay whale processing plant, a rescue hut and another house, "the manager's hut", where a couple from the Falklands stay when they are there doing environmental observations. The Penguin Micro-lite team operated from that house in 2002. For us it was off limits. We had no visitors while at Thule,

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but there were three sail boats anchored in Husvik Bay during our short foray to South Georgia. One night we had a "barbie" on board the Braveheart where those crews were our guests. Cruise ships frequent South Georgia but not South Sandwich. We saw one in the mouth of the bay on Jan 31st. From the previous description you would think that South Georgia is generally considered to be more hospitable than South Sandwich. It really is but looks can be deceiving. Mother Nature is a fickle, fiendish lady!



Climbing up a nearby mountain gave a wonderful view of the bay, Braveheart, three visiting yachts and our operating position on the shoreline.

Since landings on South Georgia were so much more genteel than on South Sandwich, we slept on the ship instead of on shore. Station set up mirrored South Sandwich—six stations, same basic antennas, but with more physical separation. With 6 stations and 13 operators, we settled on 12 hour shifts; six people on days, seven on nights. We took breaks whenever band conditions merited or weather conditions forced shutting down stations.

At shift change, antennas were typically checked and repaired and radials were straightened. While the beams performed very well at the low heights, about 20 to 25 feet (6 - 7.6 m), we constantly had them blowing over or the push up poles bending amidships. Temperatures were generally warmer on South Georgia, but winds seemed to funnel up

and down the mountains more energetically than we experienced on South Sandwich.. Perhaps this was due to greater diurnal temperature variations on South Georgia coupled with the closer proximity to the mountains. Regardless, the winds were a definite factor.

As a quick aside, on one of the more pleasant days, I forfeited my sleep time and hiked up the mountains behind us to experience a bird's eye view of the valley and bay below. The hike, in relatively warm weather contrasted to what Shackelton experienced more than a century before, gave me a deeper appreciation for what they endured and conquered! I did not even come close to cresting the mountain passes but I was huffing and puffing and blowing so much wind when I did reach the crest that I needed to *reef my sails*! I came away with a deeper appreciation for the beauty and harmony of this remote region of creation!

Harmony can become disharmony and so it was to be. We arrived in Husvik Bay early morning of 29 January. Again, from the ship's log, I quote an entry. This one is from February 1st. "Blowing like hell." Wind gusts were 60 knots (69 mph, 111 kph). Overnight the ship dragged anchor 50 meters (close to 165 feet). The day started out clear but by the afternoon it was overcast with light rain. By the next day, 3 February, we had snow midday and gusts in the 40 knot range. On the 4th, the ship's log recorded nice weather. Winds were almost a steady 25 knots with moderate gusts from then until the 6th when we had winds of 50 to 60 knots and snow showers.

Over night of the 7th we had winds of over 85 knots mixed with snow. That equates to almost 100 mph or 160 kph! On the Beaufort scale anything over 73 mph, 118 kph or 64 knots, is considered Force 12—hurricane force. I stepped outside the tent to check on a couple of teammates who went out earlier to examine the status of our antennas and tent guys and was literally blown about a foot and a half into a tent guy stake. Fortunately all I did was rip my rain trousers. The tent was on the verge of total collapse and was being held up inside by us leaning into the sides and holding onto whatever surface we could grip. The outside tent stays, hollow aluminum

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tubing with elastic keepers, were stretching and contracting so much that where they crisscrossed each other they sounded like two dozen percussionists randomly smacking their drumsticks together. The tent itself sounded like an unfettered sail, snapping and flapping unrestrained except for where we were holding it inside.

Finally somewhere around 0130 early morning of the 8th, we decided to 'abandon ship'. No longer able to operate, we took the equipment off the table tops and placed it under them for safety. With no way to get to the Braveheart and the manager's hut and other hut off limits, we hunkered down as best we could in the flattened, flapping, cold tent for the wild ride of the night.



This is what we faced on the morning after the "Big Blow."

When relieved the next morning we found that one of the sailing yachts sharing the harbor with us had been blown aground and was noticeably listing to one side⁴. By 1030 the tent had almost totally collapsed and the decision was made to vacate the area. When I surveyed the situation before we struck camp, it appeared the only antennas not damaged or totally destroyed were the 40 meter four square and the 30 meter vertical. Everything else was bent,

⁴ The crew from the Braveheart did assist the yacht's crew (husband and wife team) and we subsequently learned they moved their vessel around to Grytviken for minor hull patching to get them where they could sail on and receive permanent repairs.

broken or bent AND broken on the ground. Can you imagine that people at home pay money to go to amusement park for "rides" like this?

The wild ride was not totally behind us. From there we sailed back to Port Stanley. Over night on the 9th the ship had to slow down from a normal cruising speed of 8 to 9 knots to 3.5 knots because of 'lumpy' seas! Because of the once per week flight schedule we ended up spending a week in the Falklands and some of the team continued the adventure as VP8IDX or used their own VP8 calls, which one can acquire as a life time license for only 20 quid. I received the call VP8USA, but only made a single baptismal QSO with that call.

I shall not go into minute detail but the adventure did not end with arrival at Stanley. Some of us explored the area, enjoyed the relative comforts of civilization, learned details of the 1982 conflict and spent some time regaining our land legs and some of that body weight that was lost from various aspects of the previous 5 weeks! However, Fiendish Mother Nature was not finished with us yet. Our plane was delayed leaving the Falklands by more than 3 hours because of high winds. This caused a cascade of events which meant that most of us arrived home at least a day later than previously planned. And for me and some others, our luggage did not arrive for up to 2 days after that!

DXpeditions like this do not just happen. Those of us who were on the operating team are just the tip of the iceberg. These trips take years of planning and consulting with various agencies and with those who have gone before. We are grateful to those members of previous expeditions who shared their knowledge either directly or through previously written articles, presentations, and films. Because they conducted themselves properly, we had the opportunity to do likewise. We had a lot of help from the Falkland ham community before and after the operation. I would be totally remiss if I did not compliment the crew of the R/V Braveheart. When you sail with them, they become part of your team. They hauled and bawled right along with us. No job was too large nor too small. To paraphrase a well known US insurance agency ad: "You are in good hands with the Braveheart."

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After the planning comes the doing. While the on-site team operates, there are those who support in other ways. One example is the folks who helped configure and test our equipment and then pack it into the container that was shipped beforehand to New Zealand. Another example would be the pilot stations who provided near real time feedback from you. Paul's wife, Danielle, kept our "families" informed of our happenings via group email postings. A DXpedition does not end with the last QSO being posted in the log. For the QSL team, it then really just starts to ramp up. As I said, the operating team is just the tip of the iceberg. We may be the ones you see, but the ones you don't see are just as important.

We, the Intrepid DX team, tried our best to set a new standard for DXpeditions to these rare entities in both our conduct and in numerical results. You be the judge. Did we meet that challenge and show a modicum of endurance worthy of the trust placed in us by you, the organizations, individuals and businesses who sponsored us? Our web site at <http://www.intrepid-dx.com/vp8> enumerates all the sponsors and donors who helped make this trip a reality. Those who provided up front money and equipment are truly appreciated. This is where I recognize

INDEXA as one of those special organizations! There is no way an expedition like this could happen if the individual operators had to finance the entire trip from their own coffers. We thank you all.

Our prime objective was to put as many of you as possible in our logs to provide either an all time new one or needed band fills for your logs. As a personal bonus I add this parting thought: George Mallory of Mt. Everest fame, mentioned earlier in this tome, said the following in a 1921 letter to his wife about the Himalayans, "One comes to bless the absolute bareness, feeling that here is a pure beauty of form, a kind of ultimate harmony." That was also my added "ah-ha" from this trip. Even amongst the extremes of climate and geography, there is a harmony and beauty of nature, of the cycle of life, in these distant locales that I am grateful for having the personal opportunity to experience, endure and conquer and to do so with such an intrepid group of adventurers.

—73 *Jay*, K4ZLE

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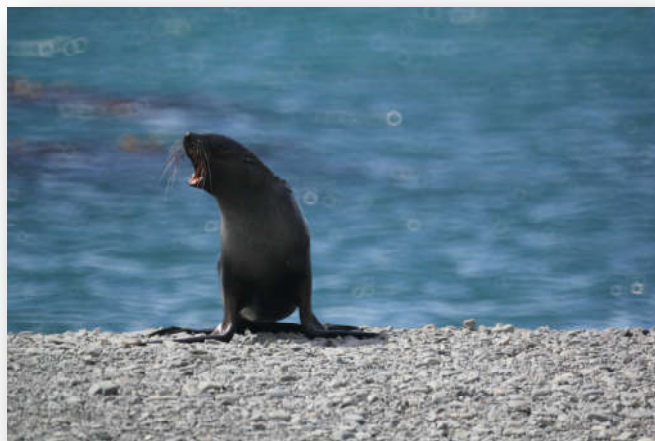


The Intrepid team that brought you VP8STI and VP8SGI: (Left to Right) Bottom row: Dave, K3LP; Dave, W5XU; Jay, K4ZLE; Ned, AA7A Second Row: Paul, N6PSE; Arliss, W7XU; Dave, WD5COV; Dave, W6DR; Mike, K9AJ; Roger, N4RR; Axel, DL6KVA; Dmitri, RA9USU; Jun, JH4RHF.

More Photos from VP8STI and VP8SGI (2016)



Who rang the dinner bell?



Whattayoudoing on my island?



It's great to find help when a long way from home.

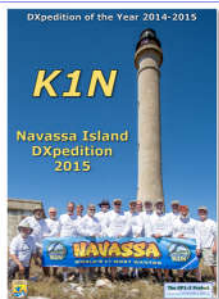


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